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ABSTRACT

Nationally, disabled persons have more than twice the college drop-out rate and only half the attendance rate of the non-disabled population. In 1990 a study was conducted at Gavilan Community College to investigate the relationship of five self-concept constructs to students' academic ability, persistence, disability status and other selected variables. The constructs, assessed by the Dimensions of Self-Concept Test (DOSC), were the students' level of aspiration, level of anxiety, academic interest and satisfaction, leadership and initiative, and identification versus alienation. Persistence was measured by successive enrollment beyond one semester. The total sample consisted of 243 students enrolled in orientation classes during the fall semester of 1989 of whom 91 students were identified as disabled. From this first sample, a second sample consisting of 72 disabled and 96 non-disabled persisters was obtained after the first census day of spring semester 1990. Three major conclusions were drawn from the study. First, the differences between disabled and non-disabled students who were persisters or non-persisters among the five constructs of academic self-concept were negligible. Second, no appreciable differences in persistence of disabled or non-disabled students were evident in relation to gender, age, or ethnicity. Finally, the study findings suggest that academic self-concept at the levels manifested in "at-risk" groups might not be as much of a contributing factor to persistence as has been previously suggested in the research literature. (JMC)

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A national survey by Louis Harris and Associates (Harris, 1986) revealed that only 60 percent of American adults with disabilities finish high school, compared to 85 percent of non-disabled Americans; and that only 29 percent of those with disabilities have attended at least some college, compared to 48 percent of the non-disabled. In this country the national drop-out rate of students with disabilities is over twice as high in the schools as that for non-disabled students, and their college-going rate is about half that of other persons. Although approximately 10 percent of the population between 16 and 65 has a disability, only a small proportion enrolls in or completes a program of higher education. Despite efforts to expand educational opportunities, a disparity exists.

California Community Colleges have maintained a commitment for providing special programs and services for students with disabilities. In 1979-1980, disabled student enrollment in all California Community College programs was 39,376 (California Community Colleges, 1981). These students received instructional services both in regular college programs and in special classes. There were 3515 class sections offered in six major subject fields. Classes in adaptive physical education and academically related special classes ranked highest in attendance for all disabled groups.

Class offerings varied by the number of colleges that offered them. Over all, instructional offerings were broad in scope within the category of special classes.

By 1986 over 48,000 students with disabilities were served by California community colleges compared to fewer than 6,000 at California's two public university systems. The largest group, approximately 29 percent, had mobility limitations, whereas the second largest group, approximately 25 percent, had learning disabilities.

The purpose of special programs and services has been to integrate students with disabilities into general college life and to provide educational interventions that lead to their vocational preparation, general education, transfer preparation, or degree achievement. Students who are identified as disabled develop an individualized educational plan and hold eligibility for services such as readers, interpreters, note takers, instructional aides, specialized counseling, use of special adapted equipment and materials, registration assistance, test-taking facilitation, and special classes.

Although statewide attempts have been made to recognize and to correct the disparity between the attainment levels of the non-disabled and those for disabled student populations, the numbers of students with disabilities in higher education are still vastly disproportionate to the general population.

Numerous nationwide studies have been conducted in order to determine what factors contribute to students decisions to persist or to

withdraw from college. The studies have concluded that students withdraw for both positive and negative reasons.

Educators long have suspected the existence of a relationship of cognitive achievement to attitudes or other affective characteristics. Data presented by Wiseman, Emry, and Morgan (1986) suggested that perceptions of increased social alienation are associated with decreased levels of motivation. In their studies of retention of students with learning disabilities, Allard, Dodd, and Peralez (1987) stated that students with learning disabilities have developed elaborate systems of avoidance which they bring to their tasks when they enter college. They theorized that as most of these students have had disappointing experiences with school, they may lack self-esteem. Much of the research about persistence suggests that perceptions of one's self-concept may be a significant contributing factor not only to the disparity of numbers of disabled and non-disabled students enrolled in higher education, but also to persistence in an educational program.

Although research is plentiful, most writers have agreed that retention efforts for students with disabilities have not been responsive to the past remedies. The causes for lack of retention have not been determined definitively. Focusing on traits or conditions that the institution cannot modify and on other variables designed to show how under-achievers differ from other students has not appeared to correct the problem.

In the Digest of Educational Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 1989) and the 1987 National Profile of College Students (U.S. Department of

Education, 1989) selected characteristics that have been studied have included (a) gender, (b) race/ethnicity, (c) age, (d) veteran status, (e) dependency status, (f) housing status, and (g) attendance status. When the characteristics of postsecondary students with disabilities were compared with those of non-disabled students few, if any, differences were found.

Enrollment at Gavilan College has been higher for disabled students than have been the state average enrollments. At Gavilan Community College in Gilroy, California, approximately 12-15 percent of the population enrolled is disabled. Yet the proportion of those students completing either a certificate program or the requirements for the associate degree or transferring to a four-year college or university remains small. These conditions have provided an opportunity to assess possible factors associated with self-esteem or self-concept that could be considered indicators of persistence in the disabled student population.

Purpose

The major purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship of a measure of each of five self-concept constructs of academic self concept to persistence, disability status, and other selected variables. The constructs were the students' level of aspiration, level of anxiety, academic interest and satisfaction, leadership and initiative, and identification vs. alienation. These constructs were assessed by scales in the Dimensions of Self-Concept (DOSC), Form H, developed by Michael, Smith and Michael (1984) and described in a manual by Michael, Smith and Michael (1989). Persistence was measured by successive enrollment beyond one semester.

Methods

Sample

The total sample consisted of 243 students enrolled in orientation classes during the fall semester of 1989. There were 91 students who were identified as disabled; the remainder, 152, as not having disabilities. Of the total sample, 105, 43.2 percent, were males and 138, 56.8 percent were females. Among the sample members were 141 students who listed their ethnicity as white, and 82 as Hispanic. Students were separated into three age categories: (a) 18-23 years, (b) 24-29 years, and (c) 30+ years. There were 144 students in the first age group, 27 students in the second age group, and 71 students in the third age group. Within the group of students with disabilities, learning disabilities accounted for 67 percent, and physical disabilities for 29.7 percent.

A second sample was obtained from the first sample following the first census day of the spring semester, 1990. This sample consisted of 72 disabled and 96 non-disabled persisters, matched for the factors listed previously. The demographic comparison is reflected on Table 1..

Data Analysis

The means and standard deviations were calculated for scores on each of the five DOSC subscales for various groups of students. Correlations were computed between the scores on each scale of the DOSC and standing on other variables for (a) the total sample; (b) the subsamples of the total sample differentiated by gender, ethnicity, and age; (c) the subsamples of the disabled student category; (d) the subsamples of the non-disabled student category; (e) the sample of persisters; (f) the sample of non-persisters, and (g) other subsamples of interest.

Selected Findings

The following major outcomes are summarized:

1. Not one difference between means of the two groups classified as persisters or non-persisters irrespective of disability status was statistically significant on any one of the five DOSC scales.

2. Of the five differences between means of the two groups categorized as disabled or non-disabled (irrespective of persistence status) the only difference that was found to be statistically significant was for the Identification vs. Alienation scale with disabled students expressing higher scores.

3. A comparison of the differences between means on each of the five DOSC scales for persisters and non persisters who were disabled revealed one statistically significant difference on the Leadership and Initiative scale.

4. For groups differentiated by gender and ethnicity not one difference between means on any of the five DOSC scales was statistically significant. In the instance of the age variable, two DOSC scales did yield statistically significant differences among the three subgroups. These were for the Identification vs. Alienation scale and the Academic Interest scale for both the youngest and the oldest age groups, this outcome indicated that the older groups had higher scores in these two characteristics.

5. For the total sample not one DOSC scale afforded a statistically significant validity coefficient in relation to the persistence or non-

persistence variable. Significant correlations were found relative to the Leadership and Initiative scale for disabled and non-disabled samples.

6. There were no statistically significant correlations found between gender and persistence, although age and ethnicity yielded statistically reliable coefficients. Hispanics tended very slightly to be less persistent than whites.

7. The only variable that provided statistically significant correlations between scores on the DOSC scales and persistence was that of age.

Conclusions

The findings of this study led to the following conclusions:

1. Differences between disabled and non-disabled students who were persisters or non-persisters among the five constructs of academic self-concept were negligible.

2. The findings appear to be of interest in view of contrary hypotheses set forth in the literature.

3. Likewise, no appreciable differences in persistence of disabled or non-disabled students were evident in relation to gender, age or ethnicity.

4. It is clear that this investigation needs to be replicated in a variety of community college settings that represent both rural and urban populations to determine whether a comparable conclusion might result.

Discussion

Although this study did not answer the elusive question of why certain students drop out of college, there is an indication that academic self-concept at the levels manifested in "at-risk" groups may <u>not</u> be so

much of a contributing factor as has been believed. A retention strategy that might be reasonably considered could be that of refocusing attention from differences to similarities among students. Supportive programs at community colleges have provided opportunities for students with disabilities that they might not otherwise have had, and have enabled student access and success at a greater rate than ever before. This study does not attempt to minimize the contribution that these programs have made. It may be that we are at another window of history and have a need to be more aware of the actual needs of our students, rather than our ideas of what those needs may be.

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Table 1

Demographic Comparison of the Total Sample of Disabled and Non-disabled Rural Community College Students Who Were Persisters or Non-Persisters

GROUPS	DISABLED						NON DISABLED						TOTAL	
	Persist		Non Persist		Total		Persist		Non-Persist		Total			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Total	72	29.6	19	7.8	91	37.4	96	39.5	56	23.0	152	62	243	100
Males	30	12.3	8	3.3	38	15.6	43	17.7	24	9.9	67	27.6	105	43.2
Females	42	17.3	11	4.5	53	21.8	53	21.8	32	13.2	85	35.0	138	56.8
White	44	18.1	10	4.1	54	22.2	61	25.1	26	10.7	87	35.8	141	58.0
Males	21	8.6	6	2.5	27	11.1	28	11.5	13	5.3	41	16.9	68	28.0
Females	23	9.5	4	1.6	27	11.1	33	13.6	13	5.3	46	18.9	73	30.0
Hispanic	23	9.5	9	3.7	32	13.2	24	9.9	26	10.7	50	20.6	82	33.7
Males	7	2.9	3	1.2	10	4.1	12	4.9	10	4.1	22	9.1	32	13.2
Females	16	6.9	6	2.5	22	9.1	12	4.9	16	6.6	28	11.5	50	20.6
Age 18-23	14	5.8	6	2.5	20	8.2	79	32.5	45	18.5	124	51.0	144	59.2
Males	7	2.9	3	1.2	10	4.1	35	14.4	22	9.1	57	23.5	67	27.6
Females	7	2.9	3	1.2	10	4.1	44	18.1	23	9.5	67	27.6	77	31.7
Age 24-29	10	4.1	5	2.0	15	6.2	10	4.1	3	1.2	13	5.3	28	11.5
Males	6	2.5	2	.8	8	3.3	6	2.5	2	.8	8	3.3	16	6.6
Female	4	1.6	3	1.2	7	2.9	4	1.6	1	.4	5	2.0	12	4.9
Age 30+	47	19.3	8	3.3	55	22.6	8	3.3	8	3.3	16	6.6	71	29.2
Males	17	7.0	3	1.2	20	8.2	2	.8	1	.4	3	1.2	23	9.5
Females	30	12.3	5	2.0	35	14.4	6	2.5	7	2.9	13	5.3	48	19.8
Disability														
Learning	48	19.8	10	4.1	58	23.9								
Males	17	7.0	4	1.6	21	8.6								
Females	31	12.7	6	2.5	37	15.2								
Physical	21	8.6	6	2.5	27	11.1								
Males	12	4.9	3	1.2	15	6.2								
Females	9	3.7	3	1.2	12	4.9								
Other	3	1.2	3	1.2	6	2.5								
Males	1	.4	1	.4	2	.8								
Females	2	.8	2	.8	4	1.6								

Note: % calculated on the total Sample N=243

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